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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR S/CT AND SA/INS

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SUBJECT: INDIAN REACTION TO ULFA TERROR DESIGNATION

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The addition of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to the Other Selected Terrorist Organizations list in the 2004 Country Reports on Terrorism has been widely remarked by the press in India. A large majority of public comments, as well as reactions from our private contacts, have been positive, although some have suggested it was the right move but long overdue. Others have seen it as part of a geopolitical strategy to exert pressure on Bangladesh, where some of the ULFA leaders are known to reside. A few have denounced it as counterproductive to proposed peace talks between the GOI and the ULFA, while a few others shrugged it off as mere rhetoric with no implications at all. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Most responses to the ULFA being added to the Other Selected Terrorist Organizations (OSTO) list were positive, with speculation revolving mainly around the possible reasons that prompted the move and the expected fallout. Most press reports claimed that the main intention is to pressure Bangladesh (usually without naming the country). A few reports pointed out that the label was a result of the ULFA attacking civilians. The influential Northeast India analyst Sanjoy Hazarika commented in The Statesman that this would be seen by New Delhi as a major gain in its campaign against violent insurgency in the region and an acknowledgment for the first time by Washington of India's security concerns in the Northeast. He raised the question whether this happened "because the Americans are now bringing Bangladesh surely but relentlessly into their war on terror." He concluded that this could help the ULFA to recognize that it has to come for talks, because "the time for the drums of war is over."

3. (U) Anandabazar Patrika, a Bengali daily, reported that New Delhi will be more cautious in its approach to the talks proposal with the ULFA (conveyed via the Assamese author Indira Goswami) after Washington has labeled the outfit "terrorist." They claimed this is because New Delhi and Washington have an agreement to work jointly against any kind of terrorist activity. The television channel NDTV reported analysts' views that incorporating ULFA (and others) on the terror list may have a negative impact by raising the prestige of the organization and giving it more status and bargaining power. Also, NDTV suggested the move would have little or no direct impact on those groups. The Sentinel, a daily from Assam, claimed that ULFA Chairman A. Rajkhowa said the initiative for peace talks is the Center's ploy prior to polls and that the U.S. tag is a move by vested interests.

4. (SBU) The New Delhi-based Executive Editor of the South Asia Terrorism Portal, www.satp.org, Dr. Ajai Sahni, said he wholeheartedly supports including ULFA as an OSTO as a means to keep the pressure on during political engagement; when asked, he agreed that the listing helped demonstrate that the U.S. does care about terrorism even when Americans are not directly threatened. Sahni, an outspoken critic of last year's Patterns of Global Terrorism report, indicated that his review was likely to be more positive this year, in large measure thanks to the inclusion of the ULFA.

5. (SBU) Assam Police's Intelligence Chief Khagen Sharma told Post that this "good thing" was expected, since the ULFA had clearly switched over from the insurgent to the terrorist mode in 2004. He emphasized that there would be no adverse reaction in India to the U.S. move - the ULFA is already a banned group and its inclusion in the terror list will not have any major impact in India. However he thought it could make a real difference internationally by making it difficult for the ULFA to garner support outside the country. Sharma said that ULFA Chief Paresh Barua had once claimed that he had support from the U.S. Another security official in Assam said that Barua may feel the pressure and even have to leave Bangladesh. However, he suggested most Assamese people were confused about the U.S. step and a segment of Assamese society was unhappy about it.

6. (SBU) Assam's Congress Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi ruled out the possibility of the inclusion affecting the process of negotiation for initiating talks with the ULFA. He said that the GOI has already established contact with the group and that the U.S. declaration is nothing major. Assam Congress spokesperson Bobeeta Sharma told Post that the timing of the tag is puzzling since it comes at a time the peace talks may be initiated. She also wondered what prompted the U.S. to take this step, since it had not paid heed to the problem earlier

when the ULFA was more violent.

17. (SBU) Retired Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha, currently the Governor of Kashmir and until recently Governor of Assam, said the U.S. decision was overdue and "should have come ten years before;" he also criticized Bangladesh for supporting militancy in Northeast India. West Bengal BJP President Tathagata Roy told Post that the move is perfectly justified and should have been adopted earlier. He claimed the ULFA has acted against the public interest, jeopardized innocent lives, maintained contact with militant Islamic groups, and is provided sanctuary by Bangladesh. Roy mentioned the arms haul at Chittagong port about a year ago as clearly indicating ULFA's involvement in the arms trade. (Note: The consignee of these arms remains uncertain, and is an ongoing subject of speculation in the region.)

18. (SBU) COMMENT: While security officials and critics of Bangladesh seem happy with the ULFA's inclusion in the list, the Congress Party in Assam sees the announcement and its timing as slightly inopportune. With state elections in Assam scheduled for 2006, the Congress has to tread very cautiously on sensitive issues, particularly militancy, where a residue of sympathy for the ULFA's aims remains, even if there is little support for the means it has employed. While the ULFA is undoubtedly the biggest and best known terror group in the Northeast, the region is riven by ethnic insurgencies, several of which use violence against civilians as a tactic. The OSTO list will undoubtedly be scrutinized in future years to see which other groups may or may not be added and with what justification. END COMMENT.

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